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ABSTRACT

The introduction of nontraditional teaching techniques into a solid framework of traditional teaching can greatly increase student motivation and attention. Nontraditional methods involve students as dynamic actors in the educational process in three ways: by increasing student motivation, maximizing the level of subtlety or detail achieved, and enlisting students in the process of teaching each other. A course in urban history provides several examples of the integration of nontraditional and traditional pedagogy. Students are encouraged to take extra credit assignments in which they research and present role plays to the class on events or people of interest to them. Two variations on the student field project appeal to students' puzzle-solving interests. In a self-guided tour project, students are assigned to visit and describe local historical landmarks. In an extended version on this project, students travel to a nearby metropolitan area for five days, visiting and reacting to historical and architectural landmarks. Such assignments provide students with a greater understanding of events in urban history. Students take a greater interest in the subject matter and retain information longer. (LP)

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TEACHING URBAN HISTORY IN NON-TRADITIONAL WAYS

By

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Paper presented at the
Regional Conference of the
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TEACHING URBAN HISTORY IN NON-TRADITIONAL WAYS

However considered, teaching is always a challenge. Teaching urban history especially so. Students often seem to defy our best efforts.

In my teaching I try to accomplish a number of things: 1) I try to show my students the subtlety and complexity of social issues; 2) that there are no simple answers; 3) yet I also try to instill an appreciation for the ideas developed by scholars of renown; and 4) finally, I also try to convince my students of the importance of learning about the social sciences, including urban history, as a value of its own.

This is not easy. Marshal McCluen has argued that since the 1950s, the television revolution has greatly effected the social psychology of motivation and attention. According to him, "the media is the message" and anyone seeking to hold the attention of an audience must have a "hot" media. I take McCluen's idea as suggestive. What might it take to change education into a "hot" media? My answer is: the utilization of non-traditional teaching techniques.

Non-traditional techniques depart from the usual techniques of reading assignments, lectures, papers, and exams by involving students as dynamic actors in the educational process. They accomplish this in 3 ways: by increasing student motivation, maximizing the level of subtlety or detail achieved, and by enlisting students in the process of teaching each other. Yet I wish to emphasize that it is not a question of non-traditional techniques replacing traditional modes of teaching. Rather, it is the introduction of non-traditional teaching techniques into a sound framework of traditional teaching.

To more adequately illustrate, let me present some examples.

Role-Playing: Two Variations

In one of my courses, I encourage students to do extra credit assignments. Among them are the playing of roles that deal with events in urban history. For example, I once had three students who were interested in riots. One was assigned the role of a leader of a mob in 17th century Naples. Another was a luddite of late 18th century Britain. The third, a participant in the great Detroit riot of 1967.

The student's responsibility was to research his role. To learn about the riot, what the issues were, what sorts of people participated in the riot, how the riot progressed, and what its consequences were. The student is then to create a hypothetical character, as close to what seems typical as possible, and to play this character's role in class. Of course, I help my students with bibliographies, and in other ways act as a resource for them.

With my encouragement, students simulate their character as closely as possible. Some even seek the assistance of the drama department and come in period costumes.

On the appointed day, I play the moderator, telling my class that by the magic of Professor Dunne's time machine, I have been able to get a character who was a participant in the sorts of events we have been reading about and discussing in class, to come and speak with us. I use a characteristic name to introduce the role-player, such as "Antonio Masaniello, the Capolazzari of Naples in 1647."

The role-player then tells the class about his or her life. How a problem developed. What he/she felt like, and what action was taken in response. My role-players have often researched their roles so well that they are able to drop authentic sounding comments about their life and times. Sometimes they effect Italian accents, for example, and comment about family, religion, taverns, and other such things.

All of this serves to break the spell of reality, allowing my students to get into the scene and take the fantasy seriously.

The role-playing begins with a presentation that usually takes about 10 minutes, in which the character tells his or her story. This is followed by a discussion in which students in the audience ask questions. These discussions usually last about 15 minutes, but sometimes I have to cut them off after 45 minutes or thereabouts so we can get on with class.

These discussions are at their best under two conditions: first, when a role-player has developed an understanding of the event sufficient to allow him/her to empathize with the historical participants, and second, when the students in the audience feel perplexed because they don't understand and, in response to their puzzlement, badger the role-player with questions, demanding that the role-player justify his/her feelings and actions.

This technique can be, and in fact usually is, a very good one for giving students an understanding of events in urban history that bridge the gap between abstract macro-structural situations and their impact on the people who experience them. This technique works because it involves students in something real and concrete, or rather a simulation that is not abstract or a mere intellectual construct, but a simulation that confronts them as a real and concrete thing. It is really amazing how students, when this technique works well, really become involved in the discussion with the role-player, as if they had forgotten that it is all just role-playing, as if they really believe that the person there before them is indeed a 17th century Napalese mob leader, or whatever.

Students tell me that the playing of these roles makes a great impact on them. They take greater interest in the subject matter, develop understandings of formerly flat abstractions in the books, and they do not forget what they have learned.

I use a variant of this technique in another class. In this case, the roles to be played are those of the great theorists: Marx, Tönnies, Simmel, Durkheim, and Weber. Again the student must research their roles, learning the theories of their character, and something of his biography as well.

On the appointed day, I again introduce the magic of my marvelous time machine. The role-players, with my encouragement, often dress in costumes and utilize other means of establishing their authenticity. For example, Marx may actually have a beard and shaggy gray hair; Tönnies may speak English with a German accent, and Simmel may drop comments about anti-semitism.

Each role-player makes a brief presentation of their theories concerning the development of modern society. This usually takes about 5 minutes apiece. Then the theorists question each other, trying to show that their theories explain things the other's leave unaccounted for. This often continues for a half hour, and is frequently the most dynamic part of the session. It is remarkable how aggressive a student playing Durkheim can be to a student playing Marx, and how defensive the latter can be in responding to the former. I often have to interrupt this interchange in order to give the students in the audience time to ask questions.

I wish to assure you of two things. First, that the realism of this presentation and the ensuing interchange does hold the attention of the entire class. I have never seen one of these sessions regarded as boring by my students. Second, that both conversations with students and test results convince me that students learn these theories more deeply and completely this way. Theory can be dull; I have plenty of experience to prove it. But taught this way, students tell me that they find it interesting and recognize its relevance.

Field Projects: Two Variations

I use field projects in two different courses. In the first I use what I call a "self-guided tour." This is a listing of locations and subject topics pertaining to the city of Colorado Springs. The student's assignment is to go to the locations, spread strategically around the city, and then to answer questions that require recording descriptions of things observed, and other information.

Urban history is involved in some of these items. For example, one question asks students which of three land use theories Colorado Springs seems to most closely approximate. The three theories--Park and Burgess' concentric zone theory, Hoyt's sector theory, and Harris and Ullman's multiple nuclei theory--are familiar to them because they are discussed in assigned readings, and have been talked about in class.

However, in class discussions, when I ask students how the tours are going, they invariably express confusion about that particular question because they have found that Colorado Springs displays characteristics depicted in all three theories. History is illuminated, however, when students realize that the concentric zone theory mainly applies to the older areas of town, while the multiple nuclei theory applies best to newer areas of town that have a suburban character.

This discovery serves to deepen students' understanding of historical change. Through this exploration, they delve into the conditions of urban life during the early 20th century that are reflected in Park and Burgess' theory. They come to understand how historical changes required other theories to reflect more contemporary times.

In the second class, I use a similar field project. This time, however, I take my students to Denver for a prolonged stay of five days in the inner

city. Here, again, the assignment utilizes a self-guided tour. Again, several of the items are historical in nature. For example, one of them requires students to go to the central railroad station. They are required to describe what they observe, to state the function the station serves, the sort of people who use the station, the uses they make of it, and to record general impressions and questions they have about the station. A second item requires students to find and describe "a relic of the past."

Student responses are recorded in journals that are turned in to be graded at the end of the course. Both journal entries, and class discussion following the stay in Denver, indicate that students are struck with considerable puzzlement and begin a process of trying to understand historical anachronisms. They often present evidence of a rethinking process that involves them in an effort to construct some notion of what life in Denver was like in the early 20th century.

Field projects involve students in concrete realities and appeal to their puzzle-solving tendencies. In this way, what might otherwise be mere abstract datums of no apparent relevance, become fascinating stimulants to curiosity. The detailed level of learning that takes place is often at such a fine and contextually inter-related level as to be subliminal. I have seen students significantly change their thinking about social issues, as the result of field projects. Often they tell me that until they did the project, they believed things that they have come to realize were mere examples of blind conformity to ideological impressions acquired early during their upbringing.

Conclusions

To use McCluen's metaphor, non-traditional techniques "heat up" one's pedagogy and the result is that the teacher will find him or herself faced

with a new problem--students become more demanding of the teacher's intellectual resources. Part of this is due to the inadequacies of old abstract generalizations as explanations. Non-traditional techniques involve students in a level of realities that are so concrete and detailed that more complex, subtle, and specific explanations become required. Finally, a frequent result is the reduction of social distance and other status barriers between students and teacher. As a consequence, students experience a loss of inhibitions and an increase in trust. They feel freer to ask questions, make observations, and share ideas with the rest of the class. The inter-student exchanges themselves open new dimensions of the educational process. And as part of this, students feel freer to take up more of the teacher's time, both in and out of the classroom.

Non-traditional teaching is not easy. If it's done correctly, it leads to increased demands on the instructor. But, for those committed to the values of education--it's worth it.